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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 06 BAKU 000574

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SUBJECT: IRAN VIEW FROM BAKU: TWENTY QUESTIONS ABOUT THE
IRANIAN PROTESTS

REF: A) BAKU 508 B) BAKU 474 C) BAKU 464 D) 2008 BAKU
1018

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Donald Lu, for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

Introduction

1. (C) Baku Iran watcher has conducted approximately thirty interviews since the June 12 Iranian presidential elections with Iranians (both Baku-based and resident in Iran) and Azerbaijani Iran experts. Interviews dealt with reactions to, and analyses of, the election results; subsequent protests; protest mechanics; faction maneuvering; and/or predicted geopolitical implications. Most sources were ordinary Iranians (students, business people and professionals) with involvement in and/or credible knowledge of the matters discussed, and a story to tell. The following attempts to summarize the information and insights garnered from these interviews in ways that respond to some of the most frequent questions being raised by Washington policy makers and analysts. While the following incorporates comments from many Iranian residents, it is ultimately a view from Baku, with all of the advantages and limitations of distance that this suggests. The aim of this cable is to assist in assembling the larger post-election Iranian jigsaw puzzle together by putting a view of many of the pieces in one place. End Introduction.

2. (S) Begin Questions and Answers.

Question #1. How great was Mousavi's support?

Answer: (SBU) Out of a pre-election survey of about thirty Iranians, all but three told Iran watcher that they and most people they knew would support Mousavi. Well before the election itself, Baku Iran watcher repeatedly heard comments from Iranian sources (most resident in Iran) to the effect that "Mousavi will win the election unless it is stolen" (see refs B and C). However, other interlocutors asserted that "Ahmadinejad will be unable to steal the election" if Mousavi won by more than four million votes) an outcome increasingly predicted as Election Day approached.

Question #2: Why did the fraud occur?

Answer: Baku interlocutors provide two possibly complementary explanations:

Explanation A: "The fraud was a desperate defensive move, in the face of Mousavi's surge, by Supreme leader Khomeini, his son Mojtaba, and their immediate circle."

The upshot is that both sides were engaged in a game of political chess in which Khomeini's circle ordered the fraud because it perceived its political survival to be at stake. In support of this explanation, an Iranian academic related that before the election a friend with access to Khomeini's circle told him that Khomeini suspected that a Mousavi victory would be followed by the sidelining and/or removal of Khomeini by Rafsanjani and Mousavi, due to "illness." The pre-election source added that "while Rafsanjani can possibly remove Khomeini, Khomeini cannot remove (the politically entrenched) Rafsanjani."

Explanation B: "The fraud was organized to protect the vested interests of cliques tied to the Revolutionary Guard, the Basiji leadership, and Ahmadinejad."

This, more common analysis relegates Khomeini to a supporting role, and suggests longer pre-election fraud preparation and planning. Since the 2005 election, "second generation" Revolutionary figures, many Iran-Iraq war Revolutionary Guard or Basij veterans, have taken over all security agencies and most lucrative positions within the state and key parastatals. The core of this network allegedly planned the fraud well before the election, as a calculated step to permanently consolidate their dominance.

BAKU 00000574 002 OF 006

Question #3: Why was reaction so intense?

Answer: Interlocutors cite two reasons for the intense public anger:

First, pre-election openness raised hopes for change even among the skeptical. The perceived election fraud cynically and brutally dashed these hopes, making people feel like fools. Many people felt swindled, and others humiliated because they had actively worked to produce a large voter turnout. One of the latter related that he had led twenty people to the ballot box. He tearfully asked "how can I face these friends?"

Second, the perceived blatancy of the fraud added insult to injury. All post-election Baku watcher interlocutors were angered by the fraud, but many were positively boiling over its crass "in your face" magnitude. As one furious contact commented, "they didn't even try to pretend that the count was real" (e.g., by making the official results closer). One interlocutor argued that the fraud's blatancy was deliberate, designed to send a message to Iranians that "we are nothing, and should forget about changing anything." Comment: This sense of personal insult maybe central to understanding the staying power of the public protests and continued widespread anger. End Comment.

Question #4: Are the protests broadly-based?

Answer: While Tehran was the epicenter, interlocutors (including some on the scene) reported large protests over several days in Kermanshah, Isfahan, Rasht, Karaj, Shiraz, Ahwaz, and other cities (including smaller towns such as Gulshahr and Najafabad). Several Tehran-area sources stressed that Tehran protests were not limited to (middle and upper class) North Tehran, asserting that large numbers of people from South Tehran also protested, and that there was considerable post-election violence in South Tehran. Baku Iran watcher has heard no reports of significant rural protest activity.

Question #5: Why weren't protests larger in Tabriz?

Answer: Public protests in Tabriz were relatively less intense and frequent than one expected, given Mousavi's Azerbaijani nationality, and Tabriz, long history as a center for protest activities. Four Tabriz interlocutors explained this by claiming that many Azerbaijani cultural nationalists and intellectuals are unenthusiastic about Mousavi personally and diffident toward what they saw as an intra-regime power struggle with little relevance to their most keenly-felt regional interests (e.g., recognition of Azeri as a language of government, authorized use of Azeri in local schools, teaching of Azerbaijani culture, etc.

Former Republic of Azerbaijan Ambassador to Iran Nasib Nasibili, who maintains broad ties to the Iranian Azeri cultural leadership, told Iran watcher on July 10 that many Azeri intellectuals now realized that continuing to maintain this distance from the issue "is probably a mistake." He predicted that Iranian Azeri participation in election protests will increase, should these opposition activities continue in Tehran and elsewhere, but asserted that "the drifting away" of Iranian Azerbaijan from the center is likely to continue.

Question #6: What is the impact of Khomeini?

Answer: Several Baku interviewees related that they took part in large protest demonstrations until hearing Ayatollah Khomeini's June 19 sermon, and observing the related security build-up. All of these (ranging in age from twenty to sixty-nine) cited fear of arrest and physical violence, not respect for Khomeini, as their reason for not marching. In the week after the Khomeini sermon several contacts predicted that public protest would continue but focus on off-street and passive resistance.

BAKU 00000574 003 OF 006

Over the long term, many Iranian interlocutors stressed that the destruction of Khomeini's long-cultivated image as an independent, ethical "father figure," and fit successor to the Ayatollah Khomeini was the most important impact of his sermon. Comments to this effect began coming in within hours of the sermon, and continue to this day. As one Iranian observed, Khomeini is now seen as "just another faction leader within the regime."

Question #7: What is the impact of Rafsanjani?

Answer: Baku commentators (including one who attended the Tehran Friday prayer service) dwelled on the "re-galvanizing" effect of Ayatollah Rafsanjani's July 17 sermon on protesters. An Iranian businessman who is closely following the protests and returned from a (self-described) "fact-finding" visit to Tehran on July 18 noted that the Friday prayer venue was a green light for a massive turnout, and that Mousavi aides had signaled his desire for a large turnout through diverse media (see item #14 below).

He added that similar alternative media was used to prepare the prayer attendees -- don't wear green armbands until you get there, assemble peacefully, and chant "the opposite" of whatever regime slogans are recited. He claimed to notice an alleged change in mood among the protesters, from a belief that resistance is dwindling, to a renewed confidence and willingness to engage in resistance. All contacts praised Rafsanjani's speech for its barbed nuances and evidence of support for protesters and continued pressure on the regime.

One commented that "(Rafsanjani) showed us that there are still deep splits" in the regime.

Question #8: What regime cracks have appeared?

Answer: Well-sourced information on this topic is hard to come by. A senior figure in the Melli Mazhab movement told Baku watcher on July of Rafsanjani's alleged efforts to replace Khomeini with a Council ("Shura") of religious elders (ref A). A wealthy Iranian businessman who has just returned from Iran claimed on July 17 that many in the lower and medium levels of the security establishment are also opposed to Ahmadinejad, and/or the repression of protests, and are prepared to look the other way to facilitate opposition activities, including (he claimed) overlooking sabotage.

Question #9: Are there splits among the Basij?

Answer: Two Tehran sources claimed to know Basij whom they said were not supportive of Ahmadinejad, however, one of these had nonetheless seen her "anti-Ahmadinejad" Basij acquaintance repressing post-election protesters. The bottom line, sources felt, is that whether for reasons of discipline, brainwashing, or money most Basij members are reluctant to defy official orders, whatever their purported private opinions may be.

Question #10: How involved are Iranian clerics?

A: Baku Iran watcher contacts, including those resident in Iran, do not seem to be waiting in anticipation for guidance from the clerical establishment. That being said, support from this quarter is regarded as tactically necessary, and is actively welcomed when it emerges (e.g., from Grand Ayatollahs Montazeri and Sanei).

Some sources have observed that the majority of Ayatollahs and Grand Ayatollahs have taken no public position on the election and subsequent protests. While most saw this as a positive signal, others cynically dismissed it as reflecting an alleged clerical focus on self-preservation, and holding back comment until the smoke clears.

Question #11: What is Sistani's position?

BAKU 00000574 004 OF 006

Answer: Najaf-based Ayatollah Sistani, originally from Isfahan, reportedly has the largest personal following of any Ayatollah in Iran. A contact close to Sistani's circle strongly doubted that either Sistani, or his Qom representative Jamal Shahrastani, are participating in the ongoing Iranian political debate. The source, formerly chief of staff to Ayatollah al-Khoei, explicitly dismissed press reports that Shahrastani participated in recent meetings of senior Qom clerics that reportedly discussed post-election political issues.

The source emphasized that Sistani is extremely judicious in determining when and how he personally engages in political matters. That being said, he speculated that individuals trusted by Sistani, but lower profile than Shahrastani, may be actively monitoring the Iranian situation for him.

Question #12: What will happen next?

Answer: Most Iranian contacts (some more nervously than others) admit that they don't know what will happen next

(though one predictedc an anti-Khameini coup led by the Revolutionary Guard leaders "who will then be allowed to keep all their money."). At the same time, most thought that widespread resistance (on and off-street) will continue, arguing that "there is no going back" to the pre-election tacit acceptance of Khameini's and Ahmadinejad's rule. "All our old caution and fear of civil war is gone" insisted one businessman. "Both sides hope to wear down the other," another commentator observed.

Question #13: What off-street protests will occur?

Answer: While most interlocutors said that they have stopped participating in public demonstrations, all expressed continued anger and resentment toward the regime, and several added that their friends are still going to rooftops at night to shout "Allah Akbar." Others also claim to be launching green balloons, and flashing their car lights while driving on main streets. Two interlocutors asserted that other "passive resistance" and similar strategies will be deployed, including work slowdowns and turning on all power in homes to cause blackouts during Ahmadinejad and Khameini speeches. (Note: According to reports, this actually happened in several Iranian cities including Tehran during Ahmadinejad's televised July address -- well after the preceding interview. End Note). In an new development, two contacts just returned from Iran told Iran watcher on July 20 and 21 separately related that a campaign is underway to boycott Russian and Chinese consumer products.

Question #14: Is there a protest "organization"?

Answer: According to four separate but complementary sources (one inside Iran), protesters look to Mousavi (e.g., his facebook homepage) for specific guidance on what to do, not a local leadership cadre or organization. Sources explained that people communicate information on upcoming protests and strategies by utilizing email networks, land lines, and word of mouth. An Iranian businessman just returned from Iran explained said that most protest guidance is released by Mousavi aides through known intermediaries several days before the planned event.

Question #15: How does the word get out?

Answer: Interlocutors asserted that the use of diverse information media as outlined in item #14 above works effectively in getting the latest word out to potential protesters. A businessman said that he uses his 120-plus email Iranian contact list to forward information that he receives, in the expectation that recipients in turn will forward the information to others. "After three days, a huge number of people are informed," he noted. A source in Shiraz said that people without access to internet can usually get information at bus stops, public parks, and in taxis (often shared by several people). (Note: Use of Twitter and other

BAKU 00000574 005 OF 006

internet media by protesting Iranians has noticeably increased since about July 10. End Note.)

Question #16: How is the regime responding?

Answer: When pressed, most Baku contacts assert that the army and most of the Revolutionary Guard will never fire on election protesters, but no one seems completely sure of this. One interlocutor commented that unlike the past, people are not focusing on regime response -- "we are fed up," he said.

Some contacts suggest that the regime may be stripping smaller towns of Basij and police forces in order to confront the protests in Iran and other large cities. A source from Gulshahr (near Tehran) described July 11 marches there as proceeding in a peaceful holiday-like atmosphere, with only a handful of police or Basij to be seen. Another source provided a similar picture of July 17 protests in Najafabad, near Isfahan.

Question #17: Are there plans for a General Strike?

Answer: There are widespread assertions that a General Strike is planned as a "final bullet" against the regime, to be deployed immediately and without further guidance should Mousavi be arrested. This was initially heard by Iran watcher from Baku-based contacts, but is now also appearing on Twitter. A businessman with contacts in the Mousavi camp told Iran watcher shortly after the election claimed that this strategy originated with Mousavi, whom he said wanted to hold off on a general strike as a last resort, which may be called even if Mousavi is not arrested.

Question #18: Are there signs of a work slowdown?

Answer: There are many assertions that work slowdowns are likely, planned, or already occurring, but little evidence. An energy sector businessman, described slowdown as an interim step that would increase pressure on the regime short of a general strike. This source also predicted that sabotage and work stoppages at oil and other energy facilities will also occur if the regime continues in power.

Reports from Baku and inside-Iran contacts of intermittent bazaar closures and short hours in several cities (including Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz, and Kermanshah) have recurred since the beginning of the post election period. Others have complained that customs clearance and normal truck delivery distribution has been disrupted, negatively affecting their businesses. It is still unclear whether some or all of these problems reflect temporary responses to an unsettled situation, bureaucratic disarray, or political protests.

Question #19: Is the nuclear program affected?

Answer: Former Azerbaijani Presidential Advisor Vafa Guluzadeh and former GOAJ Ambassador to Iran Nasib Nasibili separately told Iran watcher that as a result of post-election developments in Iran, the Khomeini/Ahmadinejad-led Government of Iran will seek to test a nuclear device as soon as possible, i.e., even before weaponization or delivery systems are ready, has significantly increased. Guluzadeh and Nasibili explained that, whatever the original (probably mixed) objectives motivating the Iranian government's pursuit a bomb, it is driven by domestic political objectives, as "the only card (Khomeini and Ahmadinejad) have left to play" to win support from the Iranian people, and regain some legitimacy.

Nasibili pointed out that Ayatollah Khomeini famously used the Iran-Iraq war to eliminate enemies and consolidate power, and speculated that any ensuing international uproar and pressure would be used in a similar way by Ahmadinejad and Khomeini. Guluzadeh speculated that the two may believe that even a worst-case scenario would make them into heroic figures.

BAKU 00000574 006 OF 006

Baku Iranians are not knowledgeable about the nuclear program, but several speculated that the current regime will try to do something "dramatic" to regain the initiative:

testing a bomb, provoking a war, or faking domestic terrorist attacks are among the possibilities mentioned.

Question #20: Should the West still seek dialogue?

Answer: Former Presidential Advisor Guluzadeh, formerly a strong supporter of U.S.- Iranian dialogue "without preconditions" (ref D), told Iran watcher that recent events have completely changed his thinking on this issue. "They have no interest in dialogue with you, or any concessions, you may offer" he said flatly; "their only interest is their survival." He added that "their only reason for talking to you would be to claim a 'victory'" in front of the Iranian people, "and to stall you while continuing to do what they want."

Guluzadeh nonetheless said that the U.S. and the West must continue to be seen as extending every opportunity to the regime for compromise "in order to show the rest of the world that you have done so," prior to eventual punitive action. Guluzadeh said, the West should begin planning now for dealing with a defiant, uncompromising, nuclear Iranian regime -- with a view towards permanently removing this threat.

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